

A publication of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network

Veterans First

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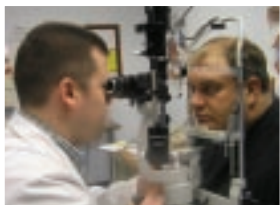
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Reviewed/Updated Date: June 13, 2006

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Becoming an Active Participant in Your Health Care

Dear Veterans:

Health care today is very different from the days of World War II when many of our veterans first visited a VA medical center. Not only have there been advances in medicine, but there have also been changes in the way patients interact with health care professionals. Back then, a patient had very little to say about his or her care.

Today, as part of our ongoing dedication to providing high quality health care and improving patient safety, the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network is encouraging veterans to be active participants in their care.

For instance, never be afraid to ask someone on your health care team about your care. If you get nervous when you visit your primary care provider, write your questions down ahead of time so you don't forget to ask them, or bring a family member or friend with you who can help do the asking. Never leave your appointment with unanswered questions.

Also, be sure you share information with your provider, including changes in how you feel, and any over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, or herbal supplements you might be taking.

You can also do your part to *stay* healthier by using the tools found on VA's MyHealthVet Web site at www.myhealth.va.gov

This issue of *Veterans First* contains several tips on how you can play a part in your own care. We hope it encourages you to become an active member of your VA health care team!



Charleen R. Szabo, FACHE
Network Director

Today . . . the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network is encouraging veterans to be active participants in their care.

ON THE COVER

(main photo)

Dr. Lawrence H. Frame examines veteran Ronald Scott.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PHILADELPHIA VA MEDICAL CENTER

(upper inset)

Veteran Richard Gonzales and his wife, Donna, discuss the findings of his doctors with dietitian Carol Patterson.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

(lower inset)

Staff optometrist Daniel Russell examines veteran Timothy Allen.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE JAMES E. VAN ZANDT VA MEDICAL CENTER

Veterans First is a health care publication of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network. The publication is intended to provide information to help you stay well, manage your health care, and learn about health services available through VA. It is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your doctor.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Veteran Joseph Brundage discusses his health with caregiver Mary Pat Acquaviva, physician assistant.

The Many Ways Social Workers Help Veterans

Since 1926, social workers have been assisting veterans during their visits to VA medical facilities. Early on, social workers were involved with psychiatric and tuberculosis patients. Today, social workers participate in all patient care areas in both VA medical centers and community-based outpatient clinics.

What is the social worker's job? "We help patients and families work through any barriers that may keep them from getting the treatment they need," explains David Ulkoski, supervisory social worker at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center. A barrier can be anything from a difficult form a veteran needs help with to the complications of post-traumatic stress disorder. "We help provide health care, but also assist patients in coping with life's situations," says Ulkoski.

The first time many veterans and their families receive assistance from a social worker is when plans are being made for their discharge from a medical center. When you're able to return home, a social worker will help arrange any follow-up care you may need, such as home health services or meal deliveries. Many times, these types of assistance exist within your community. Part of the social worker's job is to be aware of organizations that offer services and help you to contact them.

When service personnel return home from combat areas, social workers may function as case managers for the new veterans, coordinating their move from military health care into the VA system.

Social workers play a large role in VA health care for the homeless, going out into the community to offer services to homeless vets, and then managing their care through different programs and life events.

Patient education is another area where social workers assist veterans and their families. They teach them about managing their health care and inform them about VA services and programs that can be helpful. They also direct them to any community programs that could also be useful.

Most importantly, says Ulkoski, patients should know that social workers are there to lend a hand with many different types of problems. "If there is a problem, we are there to help," says Ulkoski. "If we can take care of the situation right then, we do."

If you think you need the assistance of a social worker, discuss the situation with someone on your primary care team.

One Guardsman's Experience



Guardsman Michael Keslosky at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center

Upon his return home from Operation Iraqi Freedom, veteran Michael Keslosky III, of Old Forge, Pa., learned that he was out of a job. Without employment, he was not able to keep his apartment and unexpectedly found himself homeless. "I was living on the charity of others and not sure where to turn for help," says Keslosky.

Due to a sudden illness, Keslosky went to the emergency unit at the Wilkes-Barre VAMC—his first visit to a VA facility. Because of his situation, homeless and his first time at VA, he was put in touch with supervisory social worker, Dave Ulkoski.

It was difficult to place Keslosky into a program since his circumstances didn't fit the usual model of a homeless veteran. However, says Keslosky, they didn't turn him away. "They took extra steps to get me help."

Today, Keslosky is in the Compensated Work Therapy program at the Wilkes-Barre VAMC and lives in the transitional housing unit. "I can't say enough about the folks in the social work department," says Keslosky. "They've been very helpful."

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Please contact your nearest VA medical center or visit our Web site for more information.



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT *Heart Failure*

Hear failure, or congestive heart failure as it is often called, is one of the most common reasons that veterans age 65 and older are admitted to a VA medical center. Heart failure doesn't mean that your heart has stopped beating. It means that it isn't pumping blood as it should. As a result, your body's need for blood and oxygen isn't being met.

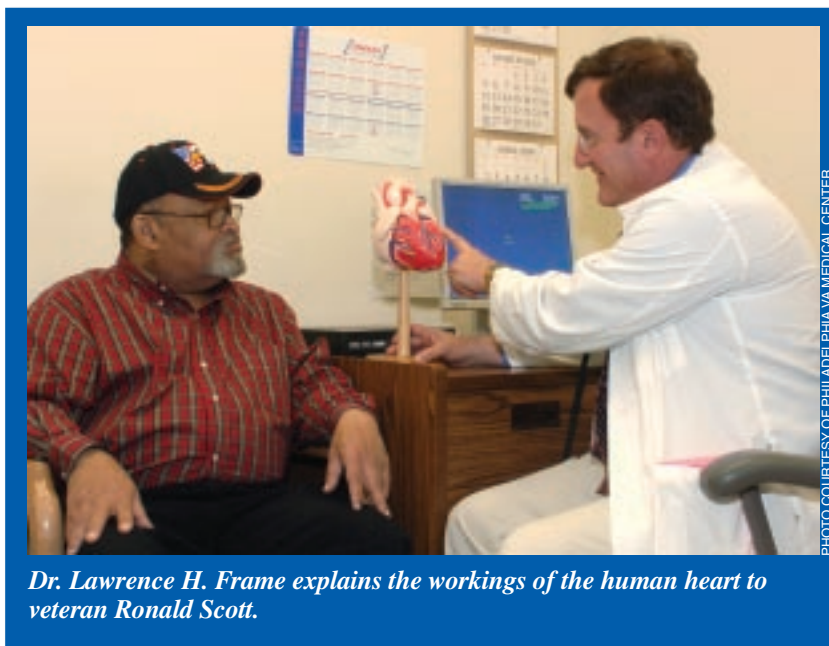
Heart failure develops slowly over time because of damage to the heart. This can be the result of a past heart attack, high blood pressure, heart valve disease, clogged arteries, disease or infections of the heart muscle, or a heart birth defect. When the heart begins to weaken from the damage, it does not pump enough blood. While the risk of heart failure increases with age, some people never develop the condition.

According to Lawrence H. Frame, M.D., staff cardiologist at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, when congestive heart failure occurs, blood backs up in your veins, the body begins to hold fluid, and your heart becomes enlarged. Signs that you could have heart failure include dizziness or weakness; shortness of breath (even when lying down); tiredness; swelling in the feet, ankles, and legs; weight gain; and confusion or the inability to think clearly.

The reason the condition is sometimes referred to as *congestive* heart failure is because of the fluid build up that occurs. "When there is too much fluid in the blood circulatory system, it begins to go into the airways, causing congestion," explains Dr. Frame.

If you have been diagnosed with heart failure, you and your provider can manage the disease so that you can go on with your daily activities. Most patients are treated with medications that lower blood pressure, preserve the functioning of the heart, and help control fluid balance.

In some cases, heart failure can be prevented by controlling damage to the heart.



Dr. Lawrence H. Frame explains the workings of the human heart to veteran Ronald Scott.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILADELPHIA VA MEDICAL CENTER

What patients can do, says Dr. Frame, *is to take their medications regularly, weigh themselves daily and report to their provider a weight gain of more than three pounds per day or five pounds per week, and tell their provider about any change in their symptoms.* Dr. Frame advises heart failure patients to check the nutrition labels of the foods they eat for the sodium (salt) content. Sodium intake should be limited to not more than 2,000 milligrams per day.

Also, patients should drink no more than two quarts of liquid per day to prevent excess fluid gain.

In some cases, heart failure can be prevented by controlling damage to the heart. "Heart issues can be identified early so they can be addressed before the damage is done," says Dr. Frame.

To protect your heart and lower your risk of developing the disease, you should control cholesterol levels and blood pressure, quit smoking, limit alcohol intake, and-- if you have it-- closely manage diabetes.

To learn more about heart failure, talk to your VA primary care provider.

Receiving Care from VA and Your Community Provider: *Tips for Making it Work*

If you'd like to receive health care from your community provider, but you'd also like to get your medications from VA, be aware that VA providers are required to manage the care of the condition for which they prescribe medication. "VA is a health care system" says Michael Adelman, M.D., acting chief medical officer for the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network. "Our providers are responsible to monitor any condition they prescribe drugs for."

For instance, if your community provider has prescribed medication for your high cholesterol and you'd like to get that prescription filled by VA, your VA primary care provider must be the one who manages your high cholesterol.

To make this "dual care" situation work so that you get the safest, most effective health care, here are some important tips.

First, as the patient, you are the link between your providers and play a large part in making sure they both have the information they need to manage your care. Be sure each has complete, up-to-date contact information (telephone number, fax number, and address) for the other. Both providers should also have an up-to-date copy of the portions of your patient record that relate to the condition they are caring for. (*Please see related story on page 6.*)

Second, when you go for an appointment with either provider, take with you a complete

list of your current medications, or —even better yet— advises Dr. Adelman, take your prescription *bottles*. This will prevent the providers from prescribing duplicate medications and conflicting drugs.

Finally, if you're confused about where you should receive your health care, have a discussion with your VA primary care provider, who can offer advice. "VA isn't restricting a veteran's choice of health care providers," says Dr. Adelman, "but when veterans want VA to provide the medications, we must be providing the care."



Veteran Richard Gonzales and his wife, Donna, discuss the findings of his doctors with dietitian Carol Patterson.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Why Doesn't VA Have My Medication?

You may have asked that question if your VA provider ordered a different medication than the one prescribed by your community provider. Usually the answer is because that drug is not on VA's formulary.

According to Eric Dill, PharmD, chief of pharmacy at the Wilmington (Del.) VA Medical Center, the formulary is the *list of medications* available in the VA system. The list is developed by a national committee of VA health care professionals from many fields, including primary care, specialized medicine, and pharmacy.

Before deciding whether to add a drug to the formulary, the committee carefully evaluates the drug

based on how well it works, its safety, and its cost. "In most cases, there are many drugs available to treat a condition," says Dill. "Sometimes, the most heavily promoted drug isn't the best choice."

Rest assured that VA's formulary contains a wide range of drugs to cover the majority of medical conditions. (Specialized drugs for some rare conditions are not on the list, says Dill, but are evaluated as needed.) If your VA provider prescribes a different medication than your community provider, it's an alternative that will work just as well.

It's important to remember that if you have any questions about a prescribed medication, never hesitate to ask your primary care provider or a VA pharmacist.



Q's & A's



What is in my patient record and how do I get access to it?

Your VA patient record contains both health and administrative records, according to Christine Getsinger, health records administrator at the Erie VA Medical Center (VAMC). The health portion includes the paper and electronic details of all the health care services provided to you at any VA facility. All medical information—handwritten and electronic—relating to your condition and care is documented, including dates and reasons for visits, procedures, prescriptions, and follow-up care needed.

The administrative record contains the clerical aspects involved in your care, such as personal data, eligibility, billing, correspondence, and other business-related items.

At any time, you have the right to request a copy of, or to review, your complete record by presenting a written request (in person, by mail, or by fax) to the Release of Information office at your VAMC. Requests are processed in accordance with all federal laws, including the Freedom of Information Act, Privacy Act, and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. If the access is denied, you will be notified, given the reason for the denial, and provided instructions for appealing the decision.



Program support clerk Shannon Rosamilia (left) assists veteran Lori Hampton with the release of information.

If VA and a community provider are both treating you for the same condition, your community provider may request copies of your VA medical record. The Release of Information Office can assist you with those requests.

How do I know if I am eligible to receive eyeglasses from VA?

To learn if you are eligible to receive eyeglasses from VA, you should check with your VA eye care provider or eye clinic staff, says Dr. Daniel Petley, staff optometrist at the Lebanon VAMC.

In general, any veteran with a compensable service-connected disability (ten percent or more) for any condition is eligible to receive eyeglasses from VA. In addition, a veteran is eligible for eyeglasses if he or she is a former POW, the recipient of a Purple Heart, permanently housebound, or in need of regular aid and

attendance. There are a few other instances where, regardless of service connection, eyeglasses can be provided, such as immediately after cataract surgery at a VA facility or if a disability results in the veteran being unable to perform the activities of daily living without help.

Veterans who are determined to be visually impaired by their VA eye care provider may also be eligible for eyeglasses and visual devices regardless of service connection.

Normally, only one pair of eyeglasses is ordered at any exam, and, in most cases, VA does not provide coatings, tints, or progressive lenses.



Staff optometrist Daniel Russell examines veteran Timothy Allen.

What can I do to protect myself against skin cancer this summer?

Most skin cancer can be prevented. Your VA primary care provider or dermatologist can advise you about ways to decrease your risk of skin cancer, including the following:

- ▶ Limit your exposure to the sun, especially midday between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. Seek shady areas and avoid direct sunlight.
- ▶ Wear protective clothing, including a wide-brimmed hat, a long-sleeved shirt, and pants. Dark, tightly woven clothes are best.
- ▶ Wear sunglasses that block out ultraviolet (UV) rays.
- ▶ Use a sunscreen every day, all year, even when it is cloudy. A sunscreen should block ultraviolet rays (both UVA and UVB) and have a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15, but the higher the better. Apply sunscreen 30 minutes before going out into the sun. Reapply it every two hours and after swimming.
- ▶ Use a higher SPF at higher elevations or in tropical climates.
- ▶ Be careful when you are on sand, snow, or water because these surfaces can reflect 85 percent of the sun's rays.
- ▶ Don't stay out in the sun for long periods of time even with sunscreen protection.
- ▶ Do not use tanning booths to get a tan. Artificial tanning devices can cause skin damage and increase the risk of skin cancer.

Veterans Update

NEWS YOU CAN USE

Volunteers Wanted at Coatesville VAMC

Coatesville VA Medical Center is looking for volunteers. If you'd like to spend a few hours helping hospitalized veterans, why not volunteer? In addition, our DAV transportation program is looking for volunteer drivers to take veterans to medical appointments. Anyone interested in volunteering may call Coatesville VAMC at 1-800-290-6172, extension 4228.

Erie VA Medical Center (VAMC) Establishes In-Home Volunteer Respite Program

Erie VAMC now has an In-Home Volunteer Respite Program. The program, which has been well received, allows VA-trained volunteers to provide in-home respite and companionship to homebound vets and their caregivers. Home-based primary care and voluntary services staff provide special training to the volunteers, who are then matched up with veterans in need of this unique service.

Lebanon VAMC Rated Among Best in Country

A recent VA national survey of veterans revealed that the Lebanon VAMC provides some of the best outpatient care in the country. Veterans rated Lebanon in the top 10 VAMCs in every category surveyed, including number one in access to care and overall coordination of care, and number two in courtesy, education and information, and visit coordination.

Philadelphia VAMC Selected as Polytrauma Site

Philadelphia VAMC has been selected as one of the 21 Level II VA Polytrauma Rehabilitation Network sites. The center will provide a high level of expert clinical care and resources for amputees, bringing together medical specialists, physical therapists, and counselors in a one-stop care setting for veterans who need ongoing rehabilitation.

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System's (VAPHS) Major Construction Update on the Web

Stay informed about the \$200 million major construction project at VAPHS by visiting the construction Web site at http://www.va.gov/pittsburgh/construction_home.asp. See fact sheets with useful information, pictures, and time frames. You can also view the groundbreaking ceremony featuring the new parking garage at <http://www.va.gov/pittsburgh/videoclips.htm>.

New Way to Request Copies of Your Military Records

You can now request copies of your military records online, thanks to a new service called eVetRecs. When you visit www.archives.gov/veterans, you will see a link for eVetRecs that will take you through a series of steps to request the information you are seeking. In order to make a request using the online system, you must be a military veteran or the next-of-kin of a deceased, former member of the military.

Medicare Part D and VA Health Care

Medicare's new Part D program began this past January. The program provides prescription drug coverage to Medicare beneficiaries who enroll in Part D. Veterans should know that VA's prescription drug benefit has been determined to be at least as good as Medicare Part D coverage. To learn more about the Part D program and its relationship to VA health care, veterans can visit www.medicare.gov, call 1-800-Medicare, or contact VA's Health Benefit Service Center at 1-877-222-VETS (8387).

SERVING YOU

VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network

Here's one good reason to get to know the facilities that make up the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network: **You are our top priority!** Dedicated to serving veterans living in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and areas of West Virginia, Ohio, New Jersey, and New York, the Network offers comprehensive services ranging from preventive screenings and checkups to long-term care. At our 10 medical centers and nearly 50 freestanding outpatient clinics, teams of skilled health care professionals - including specialists in substance abuse, prosthetics, and post-traumatic stress disorder - are committed to your health and well being.

For more details on these and other VA health care developments, please visit our Web site or call your nearest VA medical center. (See back cover for telephone numbers.)

The Latest Information for Veterans on Our Web Site

Any time you need it, you can find accurate and timely news and information for veterans by visiting the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network Web site.

www.starsandstripes.med.va.gov

Recent updates to the site include:

- a link to the Veterans Benefits Administration fact sheets;
- the Network's new patient safety brochure, which provides information and tips on how veterans can help us improve patient safety;
- a link to VA's new Web site on HIV/AIDS.

If you don't have access to the Internet at home or at the home of family or friends, check with your local library. Many libraries offer Internet access free-of-charge to the public.

VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network Medical Centers

ALTOONA - James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center

2907 Pleasant Valley Blvd • Altoona, PA 16602-4377
(814) 943-8164 or 1-877-626-2500 (toll free)

BUTLER VA Medical Center

325 New Castle Road • Butler, PA 16001
(724) 287-4781 or 1-800-362-8262
www.butler.med.va.gov

CLARKSBURG - Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center

One Medical Center Drive • Clarksburg, WV 26301
(304) 623-3461 or 1-800-733-0512

COATESVILLE VA Medical Center

1400 Black Horse Hill Rd • Coatesville, PA 19320-2096
(610) 384-7711 or 1-800-290-6172
www.coatesville.med.va.gov

ERIE VA Medical Center

135 East 38 Street • Erie, PA 16504
(814) 868-8661 or 1-800-274-8387

LEBANON VA Medical Center

1700 South Lincoln Ave. • Lebanon, PA 17042
(717) 272-6621 or 1-800-409-8771

PHILADELPHIA VA Medical Center

3900 Woodland Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19104
(215) 823-5800 or 1-800-949-1001

PITTSBURGH - VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

1-866-4VAPITT or 1-866-482-7488
University Drive Division
University Drive • Pittsburgh, PA 15240
Highland Drive Division
7180 Highland Drive • Pittsburgh, PA 15206
H. John Heinz, III Progressive Care Center
Delafield Road • Pittsburgh, PA 15240
www.va.gov/pittsburgh

WILKES-BARRE VA Medical Center

1111 East End Boulevard • Wilkes-Barre, PA 18711
(570) 824-3521 or 1-877-928-2621 (toll free)
www.va.gov/vamcwb

WILMINGTON VA Medical Center

1601 Kirkwood Highway • Wilmington, DE 19805
(302) 994-2511 or 1-800-461-8262

VA Toll-Free Numbers

VA Benefits:

1-800-827-1000

- ★ Education
- ★ Home Loans
- ★ Disability
- ★ Medical Care
- ★ Burial
- ★ Life Insurance
- ★ Sexual Trauma

Education (GI Bill):

1-888-442-4551

Gulf War Helpline:

1-800-749-8387

Health Care Benefits:

1-877-222-8387

Income Verification and Means Testing:

1-800-929-8387

Life Insurance:

1-800-669-8477

Mammography Helpline:

1-888-492-7844

Status of Headstones and Markers Already Ordered:

1-800-697-6947

Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD):

1-800-829-4833

VA Online Bulletin Board:

1-800-871-8387

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